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Roman Camps in Scotland

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Historical context

The construction and use of temporary camps in northern Britain must fit into a historical framework of the conquest and occupation of the area, which can be partially identified through the literary texts and detailed examination of the archaeological remains of Roman structures such as forts and fortresses. The exact timing of the first intervention of the Roman army into Scotland is unknown, but dates to the second half of the 1st century AD (see Breeze *et al* 2009). Followers of the historian Tacitus' biography of his father-in-law, Agricola, would credit most of the early campaigns in Scotland to that governor (*c* AD 77–83), but the archaeology paints a more complex picture (Hanson 1991; Hoffmann 2004) (see above, Chapter 2.1). In his seventh and final season, Tacitus stated that Agricola defeated the Caledonian troops at the battle of Mons Graupius (*Agricola* 29ff). The site of this battle has not been identified, but numerous locations have been put forward with differing degrees of credibility, ranging geographically from **Ardoch** to the Pass of Grange and even Culloden (Maxwell 1990). Following this subjugation of the Caledonian tribes, Tacitus reports bitterly that Britain, having been conquered, was immediately thrown away (*Historiae* I.2), as the northern part of the province was abandoned shortly afterwards.

The survival of this literary biography of one of the Governors of Britain has led to a tendency for the archaeology of the province to be made to fit into the chronology presented by Tacitus. However, further archaeological evidence is available that suggests a more complex picture than that portrayed by the literary tradition. Dendrochronological dating of timbers from Carlisle has demonstrated that an early fort there predates Agricola, and was established in the period of the Governor Petillius Cerealis (AD 71–4) in *c* AD 72 (Frere 1990: 320; Caruana 1992: 101–3). This confirmed earlier suggestions of pre-Agricolan occupation of Carlisle (based on the samian pottery: Bushe-Fox 1913: 299–301, 311). Statius' poem to the son of Vettius Bolanus (governor of Britain

in AD 69–71) referring to activities in Caledonia was noted earlier (section 2.1). Although the presence of Cerealis in Carlisle would support the notion that the Romans were operating in south-west Scotland in this period, there is currently no secure archaeological evidence to suggest that he or his predecessors were campaigning or building forts significantly further north. Furthermore, there is also no strong evidence to support early fort building by the Romans along the line of Dere Street (Hanson 2009).

North of the Forth–Clyde isthmus, two structural phases have been recorded on some of the towers on the Gask Ridge (Woolliscroft 2002a: 7; Glendinning & Dunwell 2000: 273–6), and at the fort at Cardean in Angus (Hoffmann forthcoming), though the evidence is disputed (Hanson 2009: 52–6). The towers had previously been thought to have been in use for a short period of time, either as part of the halt on the isthmus in Agricola's fourth campaign (Hanson 1991: 7) or possibly constructed after the evacuation of the fortress at Inchtuthil in AD 86–7 (Pitts & St Joseph 1985: 279). They are usually considered to have been abandoned *c* AD 90 with the remainder of the sites north of the Forth–Clyde isthmus, on the evidence of the Samian ware (Hartley 1972: 13), or slightly earlier on the evidence of the coins (Hobley 1989). The new evidence could indicate a longer period of occupation in the 1st century AD than had previously been considered, or that these structures were subject to more frequent changes than had previously been supposed, as suggested for the fort at Elginhaugh (Hanson 2007). Recently, it has been proposed that the Gask towers and road functioned as a fortified supply line during the conquest and occupation of the north (Dobat 2009).

The evidence for the Flavian occupation of Scotland is, therefore, complex. Tacitus provides a precise chronology for Agricola, but much depends on modern archaeological and historical interpretations and assumptions. Some of the 1st century AD military remains in Scotland date from Agricola's predecessors as well as to the period after Agricola's recall from Britain.

Changes of policy in Rome and pressures elsewhere in the Empire saw the abandonment of Scotland by *c.* AD 105, the construction of Hadrian's Wall across the Tyne–Solway isthmus in the AD 120s and a period of relative quiet until the Antonine advance under Lollius Urbicus, Governor of Britain in *c.* AD 139. The Emperor Antoninus Pius, Hadrian's successor, ordered the reconquest of lowland Scotland and the construction of a new frontier work, the Antonine Wall, across the Forth–Clyde isthmus. This frontier was provided with a series of outposts stretching up to Bertha near Perth. While there were undoubtedly also campaigns beyond the frontier, archaeology has not yet furnished us with any evidence to suggest how far north campaigning might have reached beyond the Tay.

By the early AD 160s, most Roman forces had once more left Scottish soil and returned to the line of Hadrian's Wall. It has recently been suggested that there was trouble in south-west Scotland in the AD 150s which may have hastened the Roman retreat southwards (Hodgson 2009). Classical texts suggest a level of unrest in Britain in the 170s, culminating in the crossing of a Wall (it is not stated which one but generally assumed to be Hadrian's) and the killing of a general, resulting in campaigns by Ulpius Marcellus in the early 180s (Cassius Dio LXXII.8); furthermore, an inscription found at Carpow on the Tay has been identified as possibly dating to the reign of the Emperor Commodus (AD 180–92) (RIB 3512: Tomlin, Wright & Hassall 2009: 458–62). It is also reported that further trouble in the late 190s forced Virius Lupus to buy off the northern tribes for a large sum (Cassius Dio LXXV.5.4). The next major recorded advance came with the Severan reconquest, under the personal supervision of the Emperor Septimius Severus and his sons in AD 208–

11, partially recorded by the historians Cassius Dio and Herodian. Severus apparently campaigned to the furthest point of the island (Cassius Dio LXXVI.13), but any victory was not consolidated because, following the death of Severus in York in AD 211, his son Caracalla abandoned the northern conquests and returned to Rome.

In addition to the three main recorded conquest phases in Scotland, other literary sources also note campaigns by Constantius Chlorus into the territory of the 'Picts' in AD 305 (*Pan. Lat. Vet.*: vi (vii) 7, 1–2), that there was again trouble with the Picts in the AD 360s (Ammianus Marcellinus XX.1), and possible Pictish wars in the AD 390s (Miller 1975). Constans came over to Britain in AD 342–3 and it was possible that he came to deal with something on the northern frontier (Libanus *Oration* 59.139,141). However, the majority of camps north of the Forth–Clyde isthmus are assumed to relate either to the campaigns of Agricola or Severus, because these are the main attested incursions into this territory of which we are aware and have generally been viewed as those that were most likely to have left archaeological evidence. Apart from an attempt to fit some of the southern Scottish camps into the Antonine conquest (Hanson & Maxwell 1986: 64–8) and the suggested association of the largest recorded camps with Severus (St Joseph 1969: 118–9), there has been little consideration of the historical context of the more southerly camps. Here, the situation must have been more complex, given the greater number of occasions when troops would have passed through the area, and the likelihood is that the literary sources will only ever provide snapshots of biased information for what was surely a complex and fluid political and military situation in northern Britain.